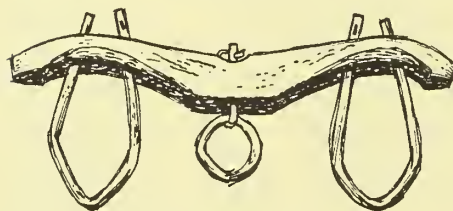


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Edited by WAYNE C. TEMPLE





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# John McConnell Knew Lincoln

*Edited by* WAYNE C. TEMPLE

JOHN MCCONNELL was born on December 5, 1824, in Madison County, New York. He was the son of James and Sarah (Smith) McConnell who came to the United States from Belfast, Ireland, soon after their marriage in 1811. From New York City the couple went to Belleville, New Jersey, where James worked in a powder factory during the War of 1812. At the conclusion of this conflict, he moved to Madison County, New York, and established his own powder plant. But in 1840 the McConnells emigrated to Springfield, Illinois, where the richness of the land prompted them to purchase a farm about three miles south of town. This astute farm family introduced—for the first time—purebred merino sheep and Berkshire hogs to Sangamon County, and Mr. McConnell was president of the convention which founded the Illinois State Agricultural Society in 1852.

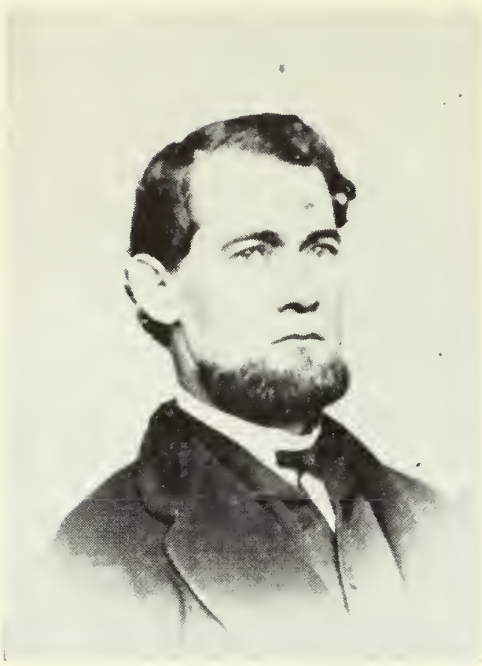
When John reached maturity, he too became engaged (with his father and brothers) in farming and stock breeding. Then, on September 22, 1848, he married Miss Elizabeth C. Parsons of Chatham; they had two sons: Samuel P. and James H.<sup>1</sup>

To aid the North in the Civil War, John McConnell was instrumental in enlisting the men of Sangamon County for Company A of the Third Illinois Cavalry which was organized at Camp Butler, near Springfield, in August of 1861 by Colonel Eugene A. Carr, a West Point graduate. For his patriotic efforts, McConnell was named the major of this regiment on September 11, 1861, and moved his troops to St. Louis on September 25. At the battle of Pea Ridge, Arkansas, Major Mc-

Connell received high praise for his action under enemy fire. Colonel Grenville M. Dodge, commander of the First Brigade, wrote on March 10, 1862: "When so many fought so gallantly it is hard to distinguish, but I noticed the daring bravery of Major McConnell, of the Third Illinois Cavalry, who supported me on the right. . . ."<sup>2</sup>

But on March 13, 1863, McConnell resigned his commission. His reason for doing so is not clear, and he soon attempted to secure another command. Perhaps this was the only way he could obtain a promotion, because on September 30, 1863, Abraham Lincoln wrote to Edwin M. Stanton, Secretary of War, and declared: "I personally know Col. McConnell, named within, to be a sterling man; and I shall be obliged if he can be mustered in by special order."<sup>3</sup> The Governor of Illinois had appointed John McConnell to the rank of colonel on June 15, 1863,<sup>4</sup> but he could find no vacancy for him. Later, on October 2, McConnell informed Lincoln that he had presented Governor Yates's letter (with his endorsement) to Secretary Stanton but there was still much doubt if he could be assigned to a regiment.<sup>5</sup> McConnell, however, refused to give up, and on May 27, 1864, he was given command of the Fifth Illinois Cavalry Regiment.<sup>6</sup>

Because of his fine record and his devoted service, McConnell became a brevet brigadier general on March 13, 1865. In fact, President Lincoln signed his commission on the morning of April 14—one of his last acts. General McConnell's regiment was assigned to General Custer's brigade and sent to Texas where they re-



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John McConnell

mained until October 6. He was mustered out with his regiment at Springfield, Illinois, on October 27, 1865.<sup>7</sup>

The Civil War honors which he had won did not change the life of John McConnell. He quietly returned to his farm south of Springfield. It was not until 1879 that he moved into the city and began to sell insurance. For many years he was a familiar figure on the streets of Springfield.

Two months prior to his death the old veteran took up quarters in the Clark House where he received room and board. He died at St. John's Hospital in Springfield at 11:15 p.m. on March 14, 1898. Not until the last day of his life had he entered the hospital. The cause of his death was "acute dropsy and erysipelas."<sup>8</sup> Funeral services were conducted at 2 p.m. on March 16 at the home of Arthur Huntington, 914 North Fifth Street.

Since John McConnell had known Lincoln well, a reporter sought him out for

an interview which was published in the *Chicago Sunday Times-Herald* on August 25, 1895. The honest old General made no fantastic claims about his relationship with the martyred President; he merely related some of the incidents which he had personally witnessed. When McConnell mentioned his trip to Washington in 1863, he was referring to the time that he sought Lincoln's help in securing a new command in the army. His account of Lincoln and the billy goat is certainly true, since Milton Hay recalled this encounter also.<sup>9</sup> McConnell's story follows:

"I never expect to see a better man on earth," says the [G]eneral, fervently. "He was, to me, a perfect being. I do not know a flaw in his character. Of course he was older than I, and I had always called him 'Mr. Lincoln.' So that when I visited him in Washington in 1863, about some matters in connection with the army of the west, I still called him 'Mr. Lincoln,' instead of 'Mr. President,' half of the time.

"Oh, about that visit? Well, it was funny. I went up there to the White House one afternoon, and when I knocked at the door, or rang the bell—whichever it was—I expected Mr. Lincoln would come and open it, just as he had done at his home here many a time. But instead of that, some other man came, and I had to tell him who I was. And he said the President would be very glad to see me, but he didn't believe I could meet him that day, as he had a good many people with him, and more waiting. So I asked him where John Hay was. I knew Hay, too. And he took me to John Hay, and he told me he was glad to see me, and that I must come up in the morning before 8—before 8, remember—and I should have a long talk with the President.

"So the next morning I was up there before 8, and John Hay knocked at the door of the next room and Mr. Lincoln came to the door. He called out: 'How are you, McConnell? I'm glad to see you. Come in here and tell me how is everything at Springfield?'



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"So I went in there—little office, no bigger than this—and he had me sit down, and we talked a long time. He asked me how many copperheads there were in Illinois, and I said: 'If you mean those who want the union dissolved there are not very many of them.' And he said: 'If they knew what I wanted to do there would be still fewer of them.'

"A wonderful thing happened while I was there in the room. A woman wanted to come in, and Lincoln heard her. He told them to have her come in, and she did. It seems her son had been arrested as a deserter, although he had only been at home and was too sick to return to duty. He was to be shot at 2 o'clock that day, and she wanted the President to save him. She told her story, and she had cried till she was almost crazy. I don't know whether he knew her or not, but he believed her story. He had John Hay telegraph to them, wherever her son was, to stop the execution and pardon the boy and have him returned to duty.

"And the woman almost kissed him, she was so thankful. I saw her after I went out, and she said she thought Mr. Lincoln was the most beautiful man she had ever seen. I was never more affected by any incident I have known in life.

"One morning in November, just after the election,<sup>10</sup> I saw a funny thing happen to Mr. Lincoln. There used to be a great big billy goat at the American stables, which stood where the government building is now, at the corner of Monroe and Sixth streets, and one morning Mr. Lincoln was coming along just when some boys had been bothering the goat, and had made him mad and he reared around on his hind legs and then he charged straight at the President of the United States.

"Mr. Lincoln caught him by the horns, and held him there, and talked to him. 'Billy,' said he, 'I didn't bother you. It was the boys. Why don't you go and butt the boys? I wouldn't trouble you.' But Billy didn't believe him, and was struggling to ram his head against him, and

Mr. Lincoln was talking to him, till somebody opened a door in the store across the street and let Mr. Lincoln in and shut the goat out. He didn't hurt the goat. He only held him and talked to him.

"One time, shortly after that, I was in his office up here in the old state house, when a tall, lank fellow with his pants in his boots came upstairs and asked to see Mr. Lincoln. He was just on his way back to Indiana from Kansas, and he had heard of Mr. Lincoln and had voted for him, and now he wanted to see him. He had brought his family with him, and they were all getting back where they had come from. He asked Mr. Lincoln what kind of a tree that was down in the yard. The day was warm, though it was in November, and the window was open. Mr. Lincoln looked out of the window, and he said: 'That is a cypress. I suppose you would have known it if you had been on the ground.'

"'No, I mean this other one, nearer the wall. You will have to look farther out.' So Mr. Lincoln leaned farther out, and he straightened up, and he said: 'There is no other one.' And the man said: 'Do you see that woman, and them children in that wagon over there? Well, that is my wife and children. I told them I would show them the President of the United States, and I have. Good-by, Mr. Lincoln.' And he stalked down stairs again.

"Going back in his life, you may remember he was elected to the legislature in 18[54], and resigned to make his race for congress. This was a very strong whig district, and there was no hope of a democrat being elected at the special election, so the whigs didn't try to get out their full vote. The democrats kept saying they wouldn't nominate a man, as there was no use; but about the middle of the afternoon of election day they jumped up a candidate their managers had all agreed on, and they rushed in the democratic votes, and when the polls closed they had him elected. So a democrat succeeded Lincoln in the legislature.

"I asked Mr. Lincoln next day how he felt about it, and he said it reminded him of the big, lubberly boy who stubbed his toe while running, and sat down on a stump, and was holding his foot in his hand. A man came along and asked him

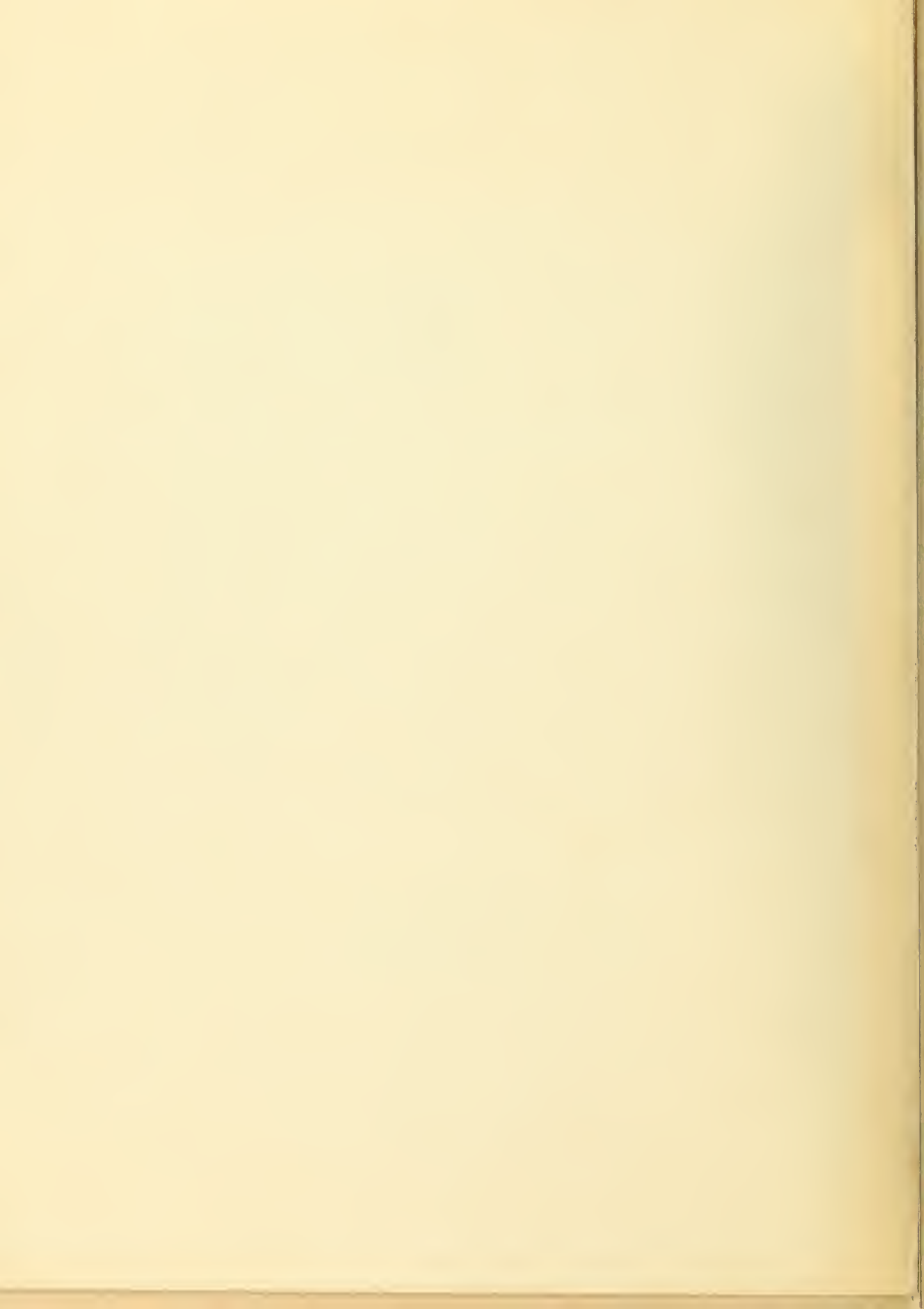
how he felt, and he said he was too big to cry, and it hurt too bad to laugh. 'And that,' said Mr. Lincoln, 'is the way I feel about this election of [Jonathan] McDaniel.'"

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2. *Report Adj. Gen. State of Illinois* (Springfield, 1886), VII, 541, 574-577; *Official Records* (Washington, 1883), Ser. 1, Vol. VIII, p. 264. Col. E. A. Carr, 4th Division commander, wrote that "Maj. John McConnell, with two battalions of the Third Illinois Cavalry, supported the right during the entire engagement, and Colonel Dodge speaks in the highest terms of their conduct." *Ibid.*, Ser. 1, Vol. VIII, p. 261.
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